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ABSTRACT

Effects of age and gender of preschool children and sex of parent on parental teaching strategies in a fantasy play situation were examined. Relations of parental strategies to children's fantasy play were assessed. Play sessions were held in a small playroom equipped with materials which facilitated dramatic production. The linguistic strategies used by 20 parent-child groupings were analyzed and parents' strategies were coded according to cognitive demand, positive support, and directiveness. Findings indicated that strategies did not vary as a function of age of children or gender or sex of parent. Higher levels of cognitive demands, positive support, and directiveness were positively and significantly correlated with children's fantasy play. In contrast, medium levels of cognitive demands were negatively and significantly correlated with children's fantasy play. Results are discussed in terms of Sigel's distancing model. (RH)

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Parental Distancing Strategies and Children's Fantasy Play

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this study was to examine the effects of parental (mother and father) and child (age and gender) status variables on the teaching strategies used by parents in a fantasy play situation and to assess the relations of parental strategies to children's fantasy play. The linguistic strategies used by 20 parent-child groupings in a fantasy play situation were analyzed. Parents' strategies were coded according to cognitive demand, positive support and directiveness. Results indicated that strategies did not vary as a function of children's age or gender or parental status. Higher levels of cognitive demands, positive support and directiveness were positively and significantly correlated with children's fantasy play. In contrast, medium levels of cognitive demands were negatively and significantly correlated with children's fantasy play. Results are discussed in terms of Sigel's distancing model.

Parental Distancing Strategies and Children's Fantasy Play

One of the major accomplishments of the preschool period is being able to think and talk about things that are not physically present in the immediate environment. According to Vygotsky (1976), children's interaction with more competent others, particularly adults, facilitates the growth of this ability. This ability to use language to refer to things which are not present has been defined by Sigel, McGillicuddy-Delisi, and Johnson (1980) as one attribute of representational competence. Sigel and Cocking (1977) have explicated the construct of distancing whereby parents help children develop representational thinking. Certain distancing strategies are assumed to facilitate the growth of representational competence in children because they are utterances that have children attend to things which are not immediately present. Distancing behaviors are assumed to form a continuum from least demanding to more demanding. The more demanding, or higher level, distancing strategies require children to function more abstractly and at higher cognitive levels.

Like distancing, fantasy play also involves movement from the here and now to symbolic understanding. Because of this aspect of fantasy, major theorists, such as Piaget (1951/1962) and Vygotsky (1976), have linked the growth and development of fantasy play to the development of representational competence. Both parental distancing behaviors and fantasy play then may

facilitate the growth of children's more general representational competence. Since distancing behaviors and fantasy are theoretically related, we might expect to find relationships between the two types of behaviors. Because of the hierarchical nature of the distancing strategies, we would expect to find stronger relations between children's fantasy and the higher level distancing strategies (Sigel & Cocking, 1977).

As parents interact with their children, they exhibit a wide range of behaviors with their children. To some extent the context of the parent-child interaction may determine the type of parental behavior exhibited (Pellegrini, Brody & Sigel, 1985). Sigel (Sigel et al, 1980) and his colleagues have identified distancing strategies that parents use with their children in a variety of situations (e.g, paper folding tasks and book reading). The first objective of this study was to see if the distancing strategies that parents used in a fantasy play situation varied according to parent (father vs. mother), age and sex of their preschool children. The research evidence comparing mother-father behavior is mixed. In a recent study comparing mother-father play with three- and four-year-old children, MacDonald and Parke (1984) did not find mothers and fathers differing on verbal behavior. On the other hand, Sigel and McGillicuddy-DeLisi (1984) found a cross-sex pattern of differences with mothers of sons and fathers of daughters using more higher level distancing strategies than mothers of daughters and fathers of sons.

The second objective of the study was to assess the relations of parental behaviors to children's fantasy play. The research evidence concerning parental (particularly mothers') influence on children's' play is inconclusive, however. Some authors (i.e. DeLoache & Plaetzer, 1985) have reported direct improvement in the level of children's's play when mothers are present. Johnson (1978), however, minimized the influence of mothers' play. Other authors have cited indirect effects of parental involvement in children's' play. Fein (1979) described an elaborative style of mothers', that is similar to Wootton's (1974) description of the way middle-class parents extend children's knowledge of a particular topic through fantasy play. These parents used children's fantasy to encourage their cognitive operations and to provide information for their children. This is similar to the parent role that Sachs (1980) reported using with her daughter. These studies are intriguing but they do not explicate the mechanisms by which parents may affect their children's play. In this study we wanted to investigate the possibility that particular parental behaviors might be related to increased levels of fantasy play in children.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 20 preschool children (32- to 68-months-of-age) each attending a University preschool and their mothers and fathers. Equal numbers of boys and girls

participated. Children's ages were ranked chronologically and divided by a median split procedure into two age groups. The ages of the children in the younger age group ranged from 32 to 46 months (M = 40.4) and the ages of the children in the older group ranged from 48 to 68 months (M =54.3). Each age group contained equal numbers of boys and girls. Mother's ages ranged from 26 to 41 years (M = 32.8) and father's ages ranged from 31 to 68 years (M = 35.75). Educational levels reported by parents were generally high, with mothers reporting educational experiences between college graduate and "some post-graduate experience" and fathers reporting averages between post-graduate and masters. All families recruited had two biological parents in the home and one, two or three children.

Sessions

Play sessions were held in a small playroom in a university preschool. The materials in the playroom were chosen to facilitate dramatic play production and consisted of two doctor's kits and related materials (two stethoscopes, two blue plastic doctor's bags, three play syringes, a plastic "doctor's hammer", an otoscope, two pairs of blue plastic eye glasses, two baby dolls, two white men's shirts and a small baby bottle) . Each parent came to the center for two 10 minute sessions. Sessions were scheduled at the parents convenience. Otherwise the order of sessions was random. The average number of days between sessions was 22.88. When each parent and child entered the playroom, they were told to play as they normally would at home.

While the parents and children played, running notes were made of activities and audiotapes were used to record language.

Measures

Transcripts were prepared with reference to running notes and audiotapes. Transcripts were coded for fantasy transformations following McLoyd (1980). Each speaker's turn was broken down into the set of his/her utterances. Each utterance was defined as a word or word-string which communicated one idea. Those utterances that expressed nonliteralness or make-believe were identified. Seven individual fantasy categories were adapted from McLoyd's work and used in coding transcripts of play. Animation involved the attribution of living or human characteristics to a nonliving object, most often a doll. Reification involved taking an existing object (e.g. play syringe, blood pressure cuff, stethoscope, etc.) and pretending that it really worked. It was also coded when someone pretended the existence of an imaginary substance related to an actual object (pretend medicine in a toy medicine bottle). Attribution of object or person property included references to pretend physical conditions associated with real people and pretend noises made by instruments. Substitution involved giving a new identity to an existing object. Object realism was coded when there was pretense that an imaginary object or material existed. Situational attribution involved pretense that an imaginary situation existed. Role attribution was coded when there was portrayal of an imaginary character or

role (i.e. nurse, doctor, mother, patient). Numbers of children's fantasy utterances from each category for each session were summed to produce a total fantasy score for each child.

Reliability of fantasy coding was determined by examination of 10% of the 80 transcripts. These transcripts were randomly chosen and were coded independently for fantasy transformations by the researcher and a doctoral student. Percentage agreement was calculated by dividing the total agreements minus disagreements and omissions by the total number of fantasy transformations. A reliability of 92.8% was achieved.

Following Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, and Johnson (1980), each parental utterance was coded for use of distancing strategies. There were five superordinate categories into which an utterance might be coded. Those were Directiveness, High Mental Operational Demands (distancing), Medium Mental Operational Demands (distancing), Low Mental Operational Demands (distancing), and Positive Verbal Support. An utterance was coded as task management/directiveness if the parent told the child what to do. This included suggestions made in the course of the play. The category of low distancing or mental operational demands included the following parental demands: that the child observe, produce information, label, describe, interpret, demonstrate or describe usage. Medium distancing or mental operational demands included the following demands: that the child sequence, represent, compare, describe similarities,

describe differences, infer similarities, infer differences, classify symmetrically, estimate, classify asymmetrically, enumerate or synthesize. High distancing or mental operational demands included the following demands: that the child evaluate consequences, evaluate his own competence, evaluate affect, evaluate performance, evaluate necessity, infer cause and effect, infer affect, infer effect, generalize, propose alternatives, resolve conflict, plan, or conclude. An utterance was coded as positive support if parents gave positive feedback, answered questions, or reflected the child's utterance. Numbers of instances in each category were summed over the two sessions so that each parent had a task management, a high distancing score, a medium distancing score, a low distancing score, and a positive support score.

Reliability for the coding of parental distancing behaviors was determined by an examination of 10% of the 80 parent transcripts. Eight transcripts were randomly chosen and were coded independently by the first author and a doctoral student. A total of 802 coding decisions measuring distancing behaviors and structuring behaviors were made. Using the formula of agreements divided by agreements plus disagreements and omissions, an inter-rater reliability of 98% was calculated.

Design

The study was designed to test the main and interactive effects of children's age and gender and parental status on parental interaction strategies in a fantasy play situation. A

child gender (2) x child age (2) x parent (2) with the last factor repeated experimental design was used. The dependent measures were the parents' three levels of distancing behaviors, positive support, and directiveness. In order to test the effects of our model of parent-child interaction, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using Wilkes criterion was utilized. We planned to use only those variables identified by the MANOVA as having significant main or interactive effects in the second series of analyses which were to be analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each dependent measure. The third series of analyses was comprised of Pearson correlations calculated to determine the relations between children's fantasy and parental behaviors (high, medium, and low distancing, positive support and directiveness).

Results

The first objective of the study was to examine the extent to which our model affected parent-child interaction. This objective was tested with a (2) gender x 2 (age of children) x 2 (parents) Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). The MANOVA detected no significant main or interactive effects. Means and standard deviations for dependent variables are listed in Table 1.

The second objective of the study was to examine the relation between individual parent interaction variables to children's fantasy production. Results are displayed in Table 2.

Children's fantasy was negatively and significantly correlated with parental use of medium distancing strategies. In contrast, children's fantasy was positively and significantly correlated with high levels of distancing strategies, positive support and directiveness.

Discussion

Parental use of different distancing strategies did not vary as a function of child or parent status variables. Mothers and fathers did not differ significantly in the amounts of distancing behaviors they exhibited with their children. Neither mothers nor fathers made differential use of higher, medium, or lower level distancing behaviors. This result is congruent with MacDonald and Parke's (1984) findings of no significant differences in mothers' and fathers' verbal behavior in a play context. Research by Pellegrini, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, Brody, and Sigel (1985) suggests that the demand characteristics of an experimental playroom situation may mask mother-father differences. Both parents may react to the researcher's request to play by following their children's lead in observational laboratory settings. Pellegrini's (Pellegrini et al, 1985) research in experimental settings has not shown the mother-father differences that other researchers have noted in home settings. Indeed, both parents adjusted their levels of interaction to their child's level of competence thus minimizing between parent differences.

The props provided by researchers may also have been responsible for masking parent and parent by sex differences because parent's self-selection of props was controlled. Eisenberg, Wolchik, Hernandez, and Pasternack (1985) note a "channeling" effect of the children's play as a result of differential toy selection. As such, in studies where parents and children choose toys, parents' selection of toys and the toys themselves may produce differences between parents that would not be found where toys were experimentally determined. The point is that some reported mother-father differences may be as much a function of context as a function of real differences between parental interaction styles or toy selection preferences.

In the present study, the preselected toys used may have restricted the possible differences between parents. Mothers and fathers may have been responding in similar ways to the implicit scripts suggested by the doctor props. More ambiguous materials or a greater variety of materials might have elicited differential prop selection and responses from mothers and fathers. In fact, when context is controlled there may be fewer differences between parental behaviors than are seen in more naturalistic uncontrolled situations.

Medium level distancing strategies were significantly and negatively correlated with children's fantasy play. The medium level distancing strategies occurred less frequently than either high or low strategies. These medium level strategies require that children sequence, represent, compare, describe and infer

similarities or differences, estimate, and classify. Examination of the transcripts reveals that these strategies tended to occur in more didactic parent sessions, particularly when parents and children discussed uses of materials. For example, a father examining a toy stethoscope said, "It's a pretty good toy. It works like a real one." A mother discussing a piece of equipment said, "It doesn't seem to belong in there. It came from someplace else." These comments and challenges may be non-facilitative of pretending to the extent that they are didactic in that they are concerned with means not ends.

The three types of parental strategies that were positively and significantly correlated with children's fantasy play were high level distancing strategies, positive support and directiveness. Higher level strategies include evaluating, inferring, proposing alternatives, planning, and resolving conflict. These strategies, along with directiveness, suggest parental scaffolding of the play scripts. Examinations of transcripts reveal numerous examples of parental suggestions that extend the children's' fantasy stories. The doctor props elicited many varied yet similar stories of hospitals, sick children, busy doctors and nurses. In creating and extending the stories, parents challenged their children's interpretations of events and uses of materials. Children were asked to consider whether babies really needed shots in their toes and noses or whether it would not be best to examine patients before treatment. Thus, many of the higher level distancing strategies appeared to set up

situations of cognitive conflict. Parents challenged their children to evaluate and plan. It appears that when parents challenge children through higher level cognitive demands their children produce more fantasy. Fantasy is an open ended affair, involving divergent thinking. The higher level strategies encourage divergent thinking also. If we assume that fantasy play is related to higher levels of representational competence then these findings are consistent with Sigel's distancing hypothesis. Higher levels of distancing strategies do encourage children to look beyond the present.

Parents' positive verbal support, which included positive verbal feedback, informational feedback and reflection of the child's utterances was also positively and significantly correlated with children's' fantasy. This category appears to reflect facilitative behavior on the part of parents. Using positive verbal feedback and reflection, parents followed their children's leads and encouraged play. This approach was related to more fantasy with our sample. A positive environment is necessary to support play (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenburg, 1983).

The combination of these factors (high distancing, directiveness and positive support) seems to represent an active, encouraging parental role. Parents and teachers who suggest and challenge as well as support their children may have children who feel free to pretend more. The combination of support and suggestion suggests that both parents and children are playing active roles in creating fantasy.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Parental Distancing and Task Management Behaviors by Sex and Age of Child

	Girls		Boys	
Variables	Younger	Older	Younger	Older
M's Lo Distancing	85.2 (25.48)	82.0 (19.49)	91.0 (21.67)	96.6 (27.4)
F's Lo Distancing	87.2 (38.6)	83.2 (18.66)	105.0 (43.57)	98.0 (26.29)
M's Med. Distancing	18.6 (19.6)	12.8 (8.4)	15.0 (6.96)	21.4 (14.84)
F's Med. Distancing	14.4 (10.45)	19.4 (9.93)	12.8 (4.76)	17.2 (7.49)
M's Hi Distancing	66.2 (20.81)	53.2 (14.31)	68.6 (10.50)	62.0 (17.13)
F's Hi Distancing	63.8 (17.28)	59.0 (9.69)	58.8 (16.67)	63.0 (27.61)
M's Directiveness	43.8 (18.13)	26.6 (15.85)	49.4 (17.72)	64.2 (30.76)
F's Directiveness	53.4 (27.8)	33.0 (14.43)	44.0 (12.86)	28.8 (12.19)
M's Positive Support	82.4 (29.53)	61.4 (30.31)	78.0 (17.46)	51.6 (10.13)
F's Positive Support	74.4 (36.47)	73.4 (35.54)	57.4 (18.80)	78.0 (29.29)

Note. M = mother, F = father.

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PARENTAL DISTANCING STRATEGIES AND CHILDREN'S FANTASY

Distancing Strategy	*r*
Low distancing	- .02
Medium distancing	- .44 *
High distancing	.60 **
Positive support	.56 **
Directiveness	.45 *

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$